

THE LINDEN LEAF



NELSON

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THE LINDEN LEAF



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Fight between Siegfried and the castle warder.

THE LINDEN LEAF

OR,

THE STORY OF SIEGFRIED

RETOLD FROM

THE NIBELUNGEN LIED

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS

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THE LINDEN LEAF.

Chapter I.

THE DREAM OF THE PRINCESS.

LONG, long ago, in the kingdom of Burgundy, there lived a princess named Kriemhilda, whose beauty, gentleness, and virtue were famed throughout the land. Her father had died during her early maidenhood, and since that unhappy day she had resided with her mother under the safe protection of her three brothers—Gunther, Gernot, and Giseler. The princes were known far and near for their valour; and the realm of Burgundy was under the

chief direction of Gunther, the eldest of the three.

The favourite residence of the royal family was the city of Worms, on the Rhine. Here King Gunther held his court, and to him flocked many noble and adventurous knights in search of opportunity to prove their valour and their skill in arms. For Gunther was a lord of a liberal hand, and his gifts were many and generous. Among the great lords who formed the immediate bodyguard of the king was a certain knight named Hagen, a prince in his own right, of whom this tale of ours has much to tell.

One night the Princess Kriemhilda went to her rest and dreamed a wonderful dream. She thought that she had been presented with a noble falcon, with which she might take part in the royal hunt. It was strong on the wing, swift in flight, and its stroke was sure and deadly. On a certain day she

took it with her to join her royal brothers in the lordly sport. But as her falcon rose soaring into the sky, two fierce eagles swooped down upon it from a lofty eyrie, and in a few moments rent it to pieces.

Then the maiden awoke, and for a while the thoughts of the dream troubled her spirit ; so she made her way to her mother's chamber, and after the morning salutation sat down at her feet in a deep window looking eastward and told her of the dream. The maiden began her tale in tremulous tones, but as she went on she gathered courage, and before the story was ended her youthful face was as bright as the eastern sky. The royal mother pondered deeply for a few moments, turning her back to the light, so that her face was in the shadow. Then laying her hand on the shining head of her daughter, she said,—

“The falcon of your dream is your princely

husband. May God guard him for your own sweet sake."

The maiden threw back her sunny locks with a gesture half of impatience, half of merriment.

"But, mother," she said, "I have no husband ; nor do I desire to have one—not in the least."

"Scorn not love," said her mother. "May Heaven grant you in due time a brave and handsome prince, to stand by your side and win honour in your name."

"Mother dear," said the maiden, rising to her feet and imprinting a light kiss upon the lady's cheek, "I have no thoughts for princes, knights, and lovers. While I may, I will shun them all."

Then she left the chamber with a tripping step and a merry laugh upon her lips ; for the morning was fair, and the dark dream of the night had now no power to cast a shadow across her path.

Chapter II.

THE NIBELUNGS.

SIEGFRIED was the son of a king who ruled in the country known as the Netherland. But when he was a little child his mother fell into disfavour, and was forced to leave her palace and to wander alone in a mighty forest. After trudging many a weary mile she came at last to a glade, from which she heard the sound of a hammer upon an anvil, as though some one were busy at smith's work. Weary and spent with her journey, she sank down on a bed of fallen leaves, with her baby on her breast.

As she lay there, between life and death, the smith came out of his workshop and

caught sight of her. He was a dwarfish man with a cunning look, and he wore a long cap, with the tassel hanging over his brows.

“Ha! what have we here?” he cried; but the queen had only strength to place her child in his arms before she passed away.

There was now nothing else for the smith to do but to take the boy home and bring him up as his own. This he did, and when Siegfried was old enough he set him to work in the smithy. But the boy seemed to be unhappy and out of his place in the workshop. He would only work by fits and starts, and when he did take a hammer in hand he broke one anvil after another with his heavy blows.

At last the smith grew tired of him, and he sent him one day into the depths of the forest to seek charcoal, hoping that while he was there a certain fierce dragon would make an end of him. But in this he was

disappointed, for the boy met the dragon, killed it, and bathed in its blood. But by a curious chance or the design of some unseen power, as he leapt into the strange bath a linden leaf flew down from a tree and stuck to his shoulders ; and the place where it rested was untouched by the dragon's blood.

Now Siegfried knew that by means of this bath he had made himself proof against swordcuts and wounds of every kind ; but he did not know of the linden leaf, or he would certainly have taken a second bath, so as to leave no weak spot in his body.

Having once more put on his armour and taken up his stout sword, which he had forged with great care in the smithy, he set out, gay of heart, to seek adventures. He travelled far over land and sea, and after passing through many great dangers, met at last with the Nibelungs.

These were two young princes whose

father had died and left them a hoard of treasure so great that its value had never been counted. When Siegfried first came upon them they were seated on the side of a mountain with the treasure between them, wondering by what fair means they could divide it into two equal portions.

There lay great heaps of shining gold and as many jewels as would have taken twelve wagons four days and nights, each going three journeys, to carry away. Besides these, there was a sword named Balmung, which had been forged by the fairy smiths, and was fit for the bravest hero who ever lived ; also a wand, by means of which its owner could gain power over his enemies ; as well as a Cloak of Darkness, which not only made the wearer invisible to all eyes except his own, but also gave him the strength of twelve men.

Seeing Siegfried ride by, the two princes asked him to be judge between them, and



The boy Siegfried kills the dragon.

they offered him the Sword Balmung for his trouble. The young hero then did his best to make a just award ; but he only succeeded in vexing each of the brothers, and they began first to revile and then to threaten him.

Then the hero's spirit rose, and taking the Sword Balmung from the Nibelungs, he slew both of them, and so won the treasure hoard for himself. But there came out of the cave in which it had been kept an army of dwarfs, who swarmed over the treasure and dared Siegfried to come near. These, however, he quickly dealt with, and he made them swear to watch the hoard for himself, as he had now, by the fortune of war, become their master.

In this way Siegfried became the owner of the Sword Balmung, the Wand of Power, and the Cloak of Darkness, as well as a hoard of gold and jewels such as had never been seen by mortal eyes before.

Chapter III.

SIEGFRIED RIDES TO WORMS.

NOW at the time when the Princess Kriemhilda dreamt her wonderful dream Prince Siegfried happened to be staying at the royal castle of his father, King Siegmund, to whom he had returned after his many wanderings.

The king kept high festival in honour of his son's return. A banquet was held, at which the guests were royally feasted. On the next day there was a tournament, where the king's liegemen, knights, lords, and princes of high degree displayed their valour before a gallery in which were seated the loveliest high-born maidens in the land.

There were games and pastimes, too, for the citizens of the royal town, and the foremost among them received many rich gifts from the treasury of the king. So generous was the monarch that it seemed, indeed, to rain jewels and gold and raiment of great beauty and value. For seven days the festival continued, and then the company departed to their homes, praising the bounty of their royal master and the brave bearing of Siegfried, his noble son.

Now when the merriment was over the prince was filled with a great desire to find out some beautiful princess who would be willing to marry him and make him a happy home. He had heard from many of his friends of the beauty of the Princess Kriemhilda, who was said to excel all other maidens as the moon outshines the stars. So he made up his mind to ride to Worms, and find out for himself whether the glowing

reports of her grace and beauty were well founded.

“If all I have heard of this princess be true,” he said to himself, “no kaiser were so mighty but this noble maid would be a worthy consort to share his throne.”

When Siegfried’s father heard of his intention to ride on such an errand to Worms, his heart was filled with misgiving; for he knew more of King Gunther than he cared to impart to his son, and he deeply distrusted that monarch. So he sought out the young prince and gently tried to dissuade him from his purpose.

“My father,” said Siegfried, when he had listened with patience to the kindly warning, “I will only wed when I meet a maiden whom I can truly love; and though as yet I have not seen the Princess Kriemhilda, I feel in my heart the love which will not be gainsaid.”

"King Gunther is not to be trusted," persisted the aged king; "and in his train there is a knight, Hagen by name, who is even less trustworthy than his master."

"Surely that is nothing to a man whose purpose is set," was the steady answer. "We are as strong and, if need be, as wily as Gunther and his knights."

"Yes, indeed, my son," said the old monarch, his warlike spirit kindling afresh at the boldness of the prince. "Let us ride at once to the city of the three brothers and bring away the princess by force."

Siegfried laughed gently at the old warrior. Then he said, "Nay, father, that were discourteous. I would not force the princess to be my bride. With a company of eleven knights will I ride to Worms. But I beg of you to equip me and my companions with clothing, arms, and steeds befitting such an errand and worthy of our rank."

Then the old king was content, and the ladies of the court were at once set to work to prepare clothes for the party, while Siegfried and his companions saw to the polishing of their arms and armour.

The work of preparation occupied many days, but when the morning of departure arrived, the knights rode out into the palace courtyard magnificently equipped. Their chargers were resplendent in cloth of gold, and their armour shone brightly in the morning sunlight.

Never before had so brilliant a cavalcade ridden from the royal city, and as the young men passed out from the castle gate and down the city street, many a maiden wept for sorrow at the loss of such a gallant company. The elder people, too, were filled with the sorrow of foreboding, and with all their hearts they wished that the young men were safely back at home once more.

But before Siegfried and his friends had been long upon the way their spirits rose, and they merrily laughed and talked together, as men should do who ride upon such an errand. Besides, the morning was fresh and fair. The birds sang in the woods through which they passed, the sky was blue and unbroken by a cloud, and the people whom they met upon their way greeted them with the respect due to so noble a company.

Moreover, these young men knew that they did indeed make a gallant show as they rode onward through the sun-bathed Rhineland. Never before, they felt, had such a company ridden to the royal city of King Gunther, and they were full of curiosity to see what impression their fine appearance would make upon the people of Worms.

Chapter IV.

THE PRINCE MEETS GUNTHER.

ON the seventh morning the party arrived at Worms, and rode slowly with a martial clang through the streets of the city. The people crowded to their doors and windows to watch the brave company pass by, and they gazed with wonder and admiration at the shining helmets and breast-plates, the resplendent trappings of the chargers, the gilded bridles and silver horse-girths. Then the whispered question went around among the watchers, "Who are these noble youths who ride so boldly through the streets of King Gunther's royal city?"

The strangers had not ridden far before

they were met by another band of horsemen, who greeted them courteously, and offered to relieve them of their chargers and their armour. Siegfried answered for his companions.

"Thanks to you for your courtesy," he said, "but as we intend to ride hence presently, we will not trouble you. Tell me where I can find your king."

"That is an easy matter," said one who seemed to be the leader of the party, turning in his saddle and pointing with his spear down the city street. "Yonder is his royal hall, and there at this moment he may be found."

Siegfried bowed his head in thanks, and rode forward towards the building to which he had been directed. Meanwhile, the king had been told of the arrival of the strangers, and had sent for Hagen to come to him and tell him, if he could, who the riders were.

Hagen came at once, and standing in the deep window of the royal chamber, looked down upon Siegfried and his company in the street below.

“It is plain,” said he, after a few moments, “that the strangers are of royal blood. Not only their raiment and their steeds proclaim it, but their proud and martial bearing. Unless I am greatly at fault, the leader of the band is none other than the far-famed hero, Prince Siegfried of the Netherland.

“It was he who fought and slew the Nibelungs, as I have heard many a gleeman tell in the banquet-hall, and took from them great store of treasure, as well as the magic blade Balmung, the Wand of Power, and the wonderful Cloak of Darkness, in which he is able to walk unseen.

“I have heard, too, how he slew a fearful dragon, and bathing in its blood made his skin so tough that no mortal blade can

pierce it. He is a dauntless man, and better as a friend than as a foe. It is no trifle, surely, that brings him upon this errand, and my counsel is that he be received with courtesy."

Meanwhile, King Gunther had stepped down from his throne and advanced with a smile upon his lips to meet the strangers, who had now entered the hall.

"You are right welcome," he said, when at last Siegfried stood face to face with him ; and bowing low in a courtly manner, the prince thanked him gravely for his kindly greeting.

"I am filled with wonder, noble Siegfried," said King Gunther, "at the honour of your visit. May I inquire the reason for your coming ?"

"That is soon told," said Siegfried. "I have heard of the fame of your valour, and am come in person to put it to the test.

It is my purpose to meet you in combat, and your broad lands and castles will soon pass into my hands."

Great was the king's surprise at this answer to his kindly greeting.

"Why have I deserved this?" he cried. "My father governed these lands in peace."

"You must fight for your own," said Siegfried. "If your own valour cannot retain your kingdom, let it pass to the stronger."

Then there arose angry words and dispute among the warriors, and there were many who laid their hands upon their swords. But when the wordy strife raged hottest, there came into the mind of the fiery prince thoughts of the gentle maiden whom for the moment, in the pride of his warlike spirit, he had forgotten; and as he thought of her his words became less boastful, and he made haste to still the strife. Before

long the dispute was ended, and King Gunther led the way to the banquet-hall, and feasted his guests in royal fashion. When the banquet was over the strangers were lodged as became their rank, and soon the city was wrapped in quiet slumber.

On the next day sports were held, and the knights were invited to show their strength and skill before a brilliant company of the ladies of the court. But Kriemhilda was not among them, though, when she heard that the games were in progress, she seated herself unseen in her bower window and watched the contests. And as she marked the prowess of the noble Siegfried, against whom no man could prevail, her heart went out to him; and she knew that at last she had seen the man whom she would be proud to take as her lord and master.

Had Prince Siegfried known who was

watching him, he would have been a happy man. But not having yet seen Kriemhilda, he felt troubled, and more than once he said to himself,—

“How can I ever hope to win a princess whose modesty is as great as the fame of her beauty? She stays within, and all my strength and skill are spent in vain. To me she is still a stranger, and she cares nothing, as it seems, for the greatest feats of valour.”

For the space of a year Siegfried stayed in Worms, riding out upon occasion to help King Gunther in his many warlike expeditions, of which we cannot tell here. And during this time he never once saw the princess for whose sake he had come to the royal city.

Chapter V.

SIEGFRIED MEETS KRIEMHILDA.

AT the end of Siegfried's year of service King Gunther made up his mind to hold high festival at Worms in honour of the brave prince who had helped him in his wars.

He did well indeed to honour the mighty hero, for he already owed him more than he could ever hope to repay. For Siegfried, by the help of his own courage and the trusty Sword Balmung, had captured a Danish king and utterly defeated a Saxon monarch. The fame of these great deeds had reached the ears of Kriemhilda where she lived secluded in her maiden bower, and the sweet face of

the princess grew rosy-red with pride and pleasure when she heard of them.

Heralds were sent out from the royal city to announce the festival. Several kings who owed fealty to Gunther, two-and-thirty princes, and a great crowd of noble knights, gaily dressed and splendidly mounted, came to joust ; and King Gunther sent betimes to tell his sister that she must come, under the guidance of her lady mother, to grace the sport of princes and of kings.

Then the mother of the princess set her needle-women to work, and for several weeks they plied the needle and the wheel both day and night. At last, on a morning at the festival of Whitsuntide, all was ready, and the knights, five thousand in number, moved forward to the lists.

Then came forth the lovely princess, attended by her mother and her maidens ; and at the sight of her the heart of Siegfried



Meeting of Kriemhilda and Siegfried.

throbbed with the keenest pleasure. But only for a moment. Soon he was once more troubled with doubts of his own worthiness.

“How can it ever be that I shall wed so fair a maiden?” he said to himself. “It is a foolish dream. Yet if I must be for ever a stranger to her, I care not to live.”

As he stood in rapt admiration, the princess looked towards him with a bright smile upon her face.

“Be welcome, Prince Siegfried,” she said softly, timidly extending her hand.

Siegfried for a few moments could find no words to answer her, so he bowed low with graceful reverence, as his manner was with women. Then, as if moved by some unseen influence, he stepped forward and took her outstretched hand in his.

“For ever will I serve you,” said the prince. “Henceforth for me your lightest wish is law.”

Kriemhilda did not speak, but her looks

plainly told the prince that his loyal service was accepted. During the twelve days of the festival the two remained side by side, and though no word of betrothal had been spoken, all looked upon the prince and princess as affianced lovers, and thought they had never seen a pair so handsome.

When the games were ended, King Gunther made many a rich gift to those who had proved their bravery in the lists. Then a great banquet was held, and next day the noble guests departed, after Kriemhilda had herself bidden them God-speed one by one.

Siegfried remained behind for a short time. But in spite of all he had done in the service of King Gunther, and of the fame he had won before he rode to the city of Worms, he still felt that he was not yet worthy to sue for the hand of Kriemhilda in marriage, and before long he began to speak of his departure.

Then Giselher, the king's brother, came to him in great surprise.

"Whither would you ride, noble Siegfried?" he asked. "Stay with us and rest, for never yet has any hero so well earned a breathing-space."

Siegfried stood for a few moments irresolute, with a troubled, restless look upon his noble face; then he held out his right hand to the young prince in friendly silent greeting.

"My steed stays in his stall," he said, turning to his squire; "I have changed my purpose. For the present at least I will stay. I had hoped to see my father once again, but the kindness of Giselher I know not how to withstand."

So the prince remained at Worms for a time, and each day he talked with Kriemhilda, and learned to love her for her gentle courtesy as much as he loved her for her grace and beauty.

Chapter VI.

GUNTHER GOES TO ICELAND.

NOW about this time King Gunther began to think that it was time to take a wife, who would share his throne and do the honours of his royal hall. He had heard many tales from shipmen who had travelled far across the sea of a certain Queen Brunhilda, who ruled the realm of Iceland.

This queen was not only a woman of matchless beauty, she was also of high courage, and skilled in all knightly exercises. Moreover, she had sworn that she would not wed until she could meet with a man able to overcome her at hurling the spear, leaping, and throwing the stone.

Many had tried, and, having failed, had paid the forfeit with their lives. But this did not deter King Gunther. Having pondered over the matter for some time, and talked with many who had heard of the great beauty of the queen, he began to think that he might be able, by good fortune, to win the warrior-maiden for his bride.

One day he sought out the chief of his courtiers, and said to them, "I mean to go across the sea and venture life and limb to win the Queen of Iceland."

"Be not rash," said Siegfried, who in his wanderings had made the acquaintance of Brunhilda. "From such a perilous errand I would gladly dissuade you."

"Take Siegfried with you," said Hagen, "and let him share the danger as he has shared many another."

The king's eyes shone with eagerness.

“Shall it be so?” he asked; and Siegfried returned the ready answer,—

“Promise me in marriage the maiden Kriemhilda, and I will share the extremity of danger with a willing heart.”

“If, by means of your help,” said Gunther, “the fair Brunhilda comes as queen to this city, I promise to give my sister as your wife.” Then, having confirmed the agreement by a solemn oath, the two princes began to make ready for their journey across the sea.

“Shall we take our warriors with us to Brunhilda’s land?” asked Gunther. “I could in a short space of time summon thirty thousand to my banner.”

“That would not be well,” said Siegfried, who knew something of Brunhilda and her ways. “Let us go as plain knights-errant, and take with us only two warriors from your train. Let one of these be Hagen the

wise and the other Dankwart the swift-footed ; then we shall be prepared to greet or to face whatever fortune places in our path."

"It is well," said King Gunther. "And in respect of clothing, how shall we appear before this warlike queen ?"

"In the richest raiment which we can procure," said Siegfried ; "for it is only right and fitting that our habit should be in accordance with the purpose of our mission."

"I will go myself," said the king, "and place the matter in the hands of my lady mother."

"Nay," said Hagen ; "let it be the pleasure of the Princess Kriemhilda to equip you for this journey."

So the king sent for his sister, and she came at once, with a smile upon her lovely face.

"What is your will, my lord ?" she asked gently ; and the king told her of their plans,

and asked her advice as to what they should wear.

Then, womanlike, and with a pleasant eagerness, Kriemhilda replied,—

“Leave the matter to me. I have rich silks in plenty, and my bower-maids shall begin the work at once. But bring me the gems from your bucklers, and they shall be sewn upon the cloth.”

This was done, and the princes departed to see to the burnishing of their armour and the preparation of their weapons.

Then Kriemhilda hastened to her bower, and calling her maidens together, told them what she required, and urged them to the utmost diligence. Bright and shining were the silks and other fabrics which were used in the work ; priceless the gems with which the clothing of the princes was adorned. For seven weeks the maidens sat steadily at their task, taking pleasure in the work of their hands.

Then when all was in readiness, a small vessel was equipped and brought to the river bank to carry the four heroes down the Rhine to the sea. And as they stood up to say farewell, the eyes of many a lovely maiden were dimmed with tears.

The Princess Kriemhilda came herself, with her bower-maidens, to bid good-bye to the princes and their two knights, but in her bright eyes Siegfried saw no sign of tears. With a smile she held out her hand to the hero.

"Farewell, Prince Siegfried," she said steadily ; "I commend to your keeping the safety of the king, my beloved brother."

"So long as I live," said the brave prince in return, "you need give no anxious thought to that ; for I will bring him safe and sound once more to Rhineland, if indeed I myself come here again alive."

Without a single word of herself or her love the maiden bowed her head, and Sieg-

fried took his place in the little vessel. Then the wind filled the sail, and the boat moved off into mid-stream.

“Who now shall be our captain?” asked King Gunther.

“I know the stream right well,” said Siegfried, taking the helm in hand.

Then like a bird on the wing the boat shot down the stream, and was soon out of sight of the watchers on the river bank.

On went the vessel, and before night fell she had covered a distance of twenty miles. For the rest of the journey all went well, and on the twelfth morning they came within sight of the fortress of Isenstein, in the land of Queen Brunhilda. The royal residence was strongly built of stone, and seemed to consist of a number of towered castles placed together.

“Tell me, my good friend Siegfried,” said Gunther, as he gazed in wonder at the fortress, “what is this place?”

Then the prince, who in his many wanderings had already visited this land, replied, "This is Isenstein, the royal home of the warrior-queen whom we are seeking.

"Now listen to my counsel," the prince went on. "In our dealings with Brunhilda we shall require all our care and prudence. When we come into her presence I will be the spokesman. And remember that for the time at least I am merely a knight in the service of King Gunther."

The others promised to abide by Siegfried's counsel and follow out his plan. Then the prince turned to the king and said,—

"It is not so much for your sake that I venture upon this perilous quest, but for the sake of your sister, the peerless Kriemhilda. She is to me as dear as life itself, and to win her as my bride I would dare any danger which a man could be called upon to face."

Chapter VII.

BRUNHILDA.

BEFORE long the little vessel entered the broad mouth of the river, by the side of which stood the great fortress of Isenstein ; and glancing up, King Gunther saw that many fair maidens were standing at the windows which looked out upon the water.

Siegfried also raised his eyes and saw the ladies, and in a merry mood he said to Gunther, "Look among the maidens, and then tell me truly which of them you would take if free choice were given to you."

"That will I," said Gunther ; "and the task, indeed, is easy. Yonder I see one

standing dressed in a snow-white garment, and of all the lovely band she is by far the fairest. I would wed her if the choice were given to me."

"You have chosen well," said Siegfried, "for that is the noble Brunhilda herself."

Now as the two gazed steadily upward the queen chanced to see them, and at once she gave orders to her maidens to leave the windows. They ought not to stand there, she said, a gazing-stock for strangers.

The queen's command was obeyed, and the women went away, only to return again when they had decked themselves in the gayest of their festival robes, and arranged their hair so as to look their best. Once more they stood at the open windows and gazed steadfastly at the four heroes, who by this time had moored their vessel at the landing-stage and come ashore.

Siegfried was leading a splendid charger, and all eyes marked with pleasure the vigour and grace of his manly form ; but as the ladies gazed from the windows, Gunther felt quite sure that their attention was fixed upon himself.

In accordance with the plan agreed upon, Siegfried now acted as squire to the king, holding the royal charger by the bridle while Gunther mounted. Then he fetched his own steed, and having mounted it, the two princes rode forward towards the castle gate. And the ladies thought as they looked at them that they had never seen a pair of horsemen so gallant and so gay.

Their horses and their raiment were white as driven snow ; their bucklers were of solid gold, each shining like the sun at mid-day ; the saddles of their horses were set with jewels of great price ; the bells upon the harness were wrought of ruddy gold.

Each prince bore a spear with headpiece bright and sharp, and their keen swords hung down by their sides as far as the spurs upon their heels.

After them came Hagen and Dankwart, clad also in costly clothing, black as the wing of the raven, and richly set with jewels brought from Eastern lands. The vessel in which they had crossed the sea was left unguarded by the riverside, while the four horsemen rode up to the gateway of the fortress.

At once the gates were opened wide, and a band of warriors came forward with words of greeting, and kindly offers to relieve the newcomers of their horses and their ponderous bucklers. These kindly offers were accepted ; but when a venerable man asked also for the strangers' swords, Hagen refused, with a grim smile upon his face.

“It is the custom of Isenstein,” said Sieg-

fried in his ear, and the knight was content with the assurance.

The guests were now led into the banquet-hall, where wine of the best was provided for them, and servants were sent to prepare for each of them a lodging fitted to their rank. Then one of the lords-in-waiting went to tell Queen Brunhilda that certain unknown warriors had appeared at the castle, dressed in gorgeous apparel, and equipped like princes of royal blood.

"I wish," said Brunhilda, "that you could also tell me who these strangers are, and for whose sake they have come to my kingdom."

Then one of her courtiers said, "My queen, I must confess that three of the strangers are quite unknown to me. But the fourth is much like the far-famed Siegfried, and my counsel is that the strangers be given good welcome, for such a prince and warrior ought not to be slighted."



Queen Brunhilda's leap.

“Now bring me,” said Queen Brunhilda, “my richest raiment and my spear; for if Siegfried has come to make the attempt to win my love, he is likely to lose his own life. I do not fear him well enough to become his wife and to call him lord and master.”

Before long the beautiful queen was as splendidly arrayed as her unexpected guests; and with a train of a hundred lovely maidens, as well as a bodyguard of five hundred warriors with drawn swords in their hands, she left her bower to greet the strangers.

When this great company entered the banquet-hall the four heroes rose to their feet, and in spite of their courage their hearts misgave them a little. But the queen, with a gracious movement towards them, singled out for her special notice the young prince of the Netherland.

“Be welcome, Siegfried,” she said. “Now tell me the meaning of your journey.”

"I thank you, Queen Brunhilda," said the prince. "I have come on behalf of this noble warrior and royal prince who stands at my right hand, and whom I serve as my lord. He is a king in the Rhineland region, and it is his great love for you that has brought us to this land of yours. His name is Gunther, and in his own land he is known as a mighty monarch. But all his power and wealth is nothing to him unless he can win you as his bride."

"Then," said the queen, "seeing that he is your master and you are his vassal, I will stake a venture with him; and if he proves himself the better, then I will be his wife. But if I should be the victor, all your lives stand in jeopardy."

"Oh, lady," said Hagen, "tell us now the nature of the contest to which you invite our royal master."

"He must throw the stone," said Brun-

hilda, "and then leap to where it lies. Then he must hurl the javelin with me. Think well before the challenge is accepted, for each of you runs the danger of losing both your honour and your head."

Chapter VIII.

THE CONTEST WITH THE QUEEN.

FOR a few moments Siegfried and Gunther conferred apart. Then the king stepped forward and addressed himself for the first time to Brunhilda.

“Most high and mighty queen,” he said, “for your sake I will attempt the hardest task that can be laid upon mortal man.”

Then without further parley Queen Brunhilda sent for her fighting gear, and her servants quickly equipped her for the contest. Over her body she drew a silken fighting-doublet which would turn the sharpest blade. Then she donned a ruddy golden breastplate, and ordered her armourer to

bring her the round shield which she had used before in contests of the same kind.

Meanwhile the strangers stood apart, waiting for the completion of the preparations. Hagen and Dankwart were full of foreboding, while Gunther himself wished the trial well over ; but Siegfried quickly formed a crafty plan, and proceeded at once to act upon it. Unknown to the others, he hastened back to the vessel by the river bank, and having quickly donned his Cloak of Darkness, became at once invisible. Then he hurried back and joined his party, though none could see him ; and the queen's attendants were so busy carrying out the orders of their mistress that they did not notice that he could nowhere be seen.

Certain of Brunhilda's servants now marked out the ring in which the trial was to take place. Then the queen stepped to the mark and called for her shield. At once her

attendants came forward, carrying a great round buckler made of ruddy gold, with broad clasps of steel. Attached to it was a baldric or belt, set with gems of priceless value. It took four strong men to carry this shield, but when the baldric had been placed across her shoulder, Brunhilda bore the weight upon her left arm with perfect ease.

Then came forward three more attendants, who carried Brunhilda's spear. It was indeed a weapon for a giant, with a broad keen head of steel which shone brightly in the sun. When King Gunther saw it his heart sank within him, and he muttered to himself, "What can be the end of this? The queen cannot be a mortal woman. If only I were safely back in Burgundy, thoughts of love and marriage would trouble me no more."

Meanwhile Dankwart, too, was full of misgiving, though his thoughts were bolder than those of his chief.

“If Hagen and myself,” he cried, “had weapons in our hands, these warriors of Brunhilda would not dare to look at us with such open discourtesy.”

These bold words reached the ears of Brunhilda herself, and with a smile upon her lips she turned to one of her attendants.

“Does he think himself so valiant?” she said. “Bring them their armour, then, and let the heroes handle their keen-edged swords once again.”

The command was immediately obeyed, and with joy Dankwart once more felt his fingers close upon the hilt of his trusty sword.

“Now play your games, and welcome!” he cried aloud. “Gunther need fear no danger, seeing that we have our swords again.”

All was now ready, and twelve of the queen’s attendants brought forward, with

much strain and effort, the stone which was to be thrown by Queen Brunhilda and Gunther in turn.

“Heaven help us!” cried Hagen in despair. “What bride is this that our royal master thinks to win?”

Then the queen began to wind her sleeves around her snow-white arms, and having done this slowly and deliberately, she fastened the huge buckler upon her left forearm. Now she was quite ready to begin the fight, and stood with the spear poised in her right hand.

Meanwhile Gunther stood in his appointed place, and as he marked the quiet preparations and confident air of his maiden opponent his heart quailed within him. Suddenly he felt some one twitch him by the hand, and looked round quickly, but could see no one near him.

“Who touched me?” he said to himself;

and a voice from out of the empty air replied, "It is Siegfried. 'Tis I, your trusty friend. Banish your fears and play the man.

"Unhand your shield and let me carry it," continued the voice, "and mark well whatever directions I may give you. Yours must be the gestures throughout this trial, but I will do each deed."

Gunther's heart grew light as he listened to these words, for he had full reason for trusting in the noble prince.

Then the trial began. With all her strength the maiden-queen hurled the spear against the shield of Gunther, which concealed the form of Siegfried. Bright sparks flew from the steel, the stout lance-head crashed through the shield, and fire flashed from the breastplate of Gunther as it struck him with mighty force.

So heavy was the blow that the blood gushed from the mouth of Siegfried. But

in a moment he gripped the spear, tore it from the shield, and sent it whizzing through the air towards the place where Queen Brunhilda stood—but not with the point towards her.

“I will not harm her, this maid who is so fair,” he said to himself as he poised the javelin. So he turned the sharp head of the spear behind him, and it was the wooden shaft which struck a mighty blow upon Brunhilda’s vest of steel.

The stout-hearted queen staggered and almost fell. But she soon recovered, and cried courteously, “I thank thee, noble Gunther; thy shot hath found its mark.” Little did she know of the mighty hero who fought the king’s battle for him.

Then the queen moved swiftly to the spot where lay the great stone. The anger of defeat was rising within her, and served to increase her strength. Raising the stone,

she hurled it from her with all her might, and then leapt after it while her armour rang again. The stone fell twelve good arm's-lengths from the place where she had stood, but by the spring which she gave she cleared it by a pace.

Gunther now stepped forward to the stone and raised it, not without effort. But it was Siegfried who hurled it through the air, and sent it by his mighty strength beyond the point reached by the queen. Then the prince, taking Gunther within the embrace of his strong right arm, leapt with him beyond the stone by almost two paces.

Brunhilda grew rosy with anger. Then with an imperious gesture she turned to her people.

"Come hither, my kinsmen," she cried, "and bring with you the chief of my liegemen; for now must all of you bow the

knee to King Gunther, whose underlings and thralls you are from this day forward."

Then the brave warriors, to the number of a score, came forward and laid their weapons at the feet of Gunther in sign of obedience and as an act of homage, thinking, as did Brunhilda and all except Gunther himself, that the contest had been won by the skill and strength of the royal prince from the Rhineland.

Gunther now stepped forward gracefully enough, for he was at least well-bred and courtly. Then the noble queen took him by the hand, and said that from that day he should rule both her and her people; and she begged the king to enter the royal palace, which now he had every right to call his own.

Chapter IX.

SIEGFRIED FETCHES THE NIBELUNGS.

WHILE Brunhilda was leading King Gunther into the palace hall Siegfried hastened to the boat, and having hid away his Cloak of Darkness returned quickly to his friends. Then as they sat at the banquet he began to question Gunther of the *coming* contest with Queen Brunhilda.

“Wherefore do you delay, my lord?” he said. “Let us see quickly how the combat of man with maid will end.”

Then the queen, in great surprise, said to him, “How does it happen, noble Siegfried, that you have seen nothing of the trial, in

which I was overcome by the skill and strength of King Gunther ? ”

It was Hagen who gave the answer.

“ Your valiant bearing before the combat, my queen,” he said, “ did much disturb us. Therefore Prince Siegfried went alone to our ship to consider the matter ; and while he was away the king, our master, won the warlike game. For this reason the prince knows nothing of what has happened.”

“ Right welcome is the news,” said Siegfried, adding, with some lack of tact and courtesy, “ the event pleases me well. And now, noble maiden, according to your word, you must go with us across the sea.”

“ Not so fast, Prince Siegfried,” said the queen, somewhat hastily. “ That cannot be until all my liegemen have been assembled in this hall, and have heard from my own lips the story of the conquest.”

Then Brunhilda called her heralds, and

sent them in all directions to bid her friends, kinsmen, and liegemen come to Isenstein without delay. At once they answered to her call, and day after day they came riding to the fortress, arrayed in full armour as if prepared for battle.

“By my faith,” said Hagen to his friends, “we have not yet seen a fair end to our adventure. With these liegemen of the queen we shall have some trouble before long.”

“Leave the matter to me,” said Siegfried. “I will forestall the danger which you dread. I must leave you for a time, if I am to bring help ; but in a short time I will return with a band of chosen warriors, of whom you have not even heard. You must not doubt me or seek to find me, for I am going across the sea.”

“Make haste to return, brave Siegfried,” said King Gunther.

“I will come back before many days have passed,” answered the prince. “Meanwhile you must make excuses for me to the queen.”

At once Siegfried departed, and having donned his Cloak of Darkness, sought out a boat among those by the riverside. Stepping aboard, he steered the little vessel quickly seaward, and those who saw it pass quickly down the river wondered greatly; for the boat sped onward before the wind on a straight course, and yet no steersman could be seen aboard.

When the prince had voyaged for a day and a night he came to the shores of the country known as the Nibelung land, where he kept his great store of treasure. He ran his skiff ashore, and, having landed, climbed slowly up the steep side of a lofty mountain, near the summit of which stood a lordly castle.

He found the gate locked, and began to knock loudly upon it. Then a voice called out, "Who comes knocking so loudly at our door?"

Siegfried disguised his voice as he answered, "I am a warrior. Undo the gate, or you will repent it."

The gatekeeper said no word in reply, but proceeded at once to don his armour. Then he set his helmet upon his head, seized his buckler, and opened wide the gate.

Siegfried now saw that he had a giant to deal with, and braced himself for the fight. But in spite of his bold defence, the first onset of his opponent, who carried a great bar of iron in his right hand, broke his shield-clasps. Then the two closed in combat, and though Siegfried had much ado to render a good account of himself, he felt secretly proud of the faithful guardian of his treasure-house.

So loud were the clanging blows that all the castle rang, and those within began to wonder whence came the deafening din. Then the giant warder fell to the earth with such a mighty crash that the sound of it was heard deep down in the treasure cave under the mountain, where lived a bold dwarf named Alberich.

At once the little man seized his weapons and ran to the castle gateway, where, to his great surprise, he found a stranger busily engaged in binding the arms and legs of the giant warder. Then the dwarf ran swiftly forward, carrying in his right hand a heavy seven-thonged whip with a handle of gold. Siegfried raised his eyes, saw who was coming, and had time to lift his buckler above his head before the blows from the dwarf's whip began to fall like hail.

So fiercely did he strike that the stout

shield was broken, and Siegfried flung it aside as useless. Then, with a smile upon his lips, he sheathed his sword, ran at the dwarf, and gripped him by the beard.

"Have done!" cried the little man, lowering his whip. But Siegfried gripped his arms, and bound them securely about him.

Alberich was now powerless, and began to question.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"My name is Siegfried," was the quiet reply. "I should be known to you."

An elfish smile broke upon the face of the dwarf.

"That is goodly hearing, my master," he cried in glee. "My life is in your hands. If you spare it, I will do your bidding in all things."

Siegfried answered quickly, "You must go straightway and summon to my side a thousand of the Nibelung warriors, the

bravest of the brave. Do not ask why their services are required. It is enough for them and for you that I send out the summons."

Then the prince unbound the cords with which he had secured both the giant warder and the dwarf, and the latter ran to call together the Nibelung warriors who lived within the castle.

"Up, up, ye heroes!" he shouted at the doorway of the great hall, where many of the knights who formed the guard of the treasury lay sleeping. "Hasten now to Siegfried, your master, who calls you."

At once they sprang to their feet and quickly donned their armour. Then they came out in martial order to the gateway of the castle, where they found their master, Siegfried, and knelt in turn to kiss his hand.

After a hasty meal in the castle hall the prince gave his orders. Early the next

morning the thousand warriors were to be ready, mounted and equipped for service.

When the next day dawned Siegfried placed himself at their head, and led them down to the seashore. There they found boats to convey them to Brunhilda's land ; and in a short space of time Siegfried stood within the shadow of the walls of Isenstein, the captain of as gallant a band of warriors as was ever led by a hero prince.

Chapter X.

SIEGFRIED THE HERALD.

WHEN Siegfried landed with his Nibelung warriors, Queen Brunhilda happened to be walking with Gunther and her maidens upon a terrace which overlooked the river.

“Do any know who these may be?” she asked, pausing in her walk.

“They are warriors of mine,” said Gunther, with a low obeisance. “I sent my knight to fetch them, and here they are, as you can see.”

“Tell me, my lord king,” said the queen, “how I must welcome them.”

“Go out to meet them, my queen,” said

Gunther, "and give them a hearty greeting to this land."

Then Brunhilda, with Gunther by her side, stepped down to the castle gate and gave the warriors a queenly yet imperious greeting. Soon the newcomers were hospitably lodged within the great fortress, which was now filled to overflowing with knights and men-at-arms. But the heroes from the Rhineland were no longer filled with fear at what might befall.

On the next day, as Queen Brunhilda sat in the banquet-hall, she said to those at the high table, "I am minded to give rich gifts to all those of my liegemen who have come here so readily at my call. Who will take upon himself the burden of the duty?"

"I will, and readily," said Dankwart; and the queen at once gave to him the keys of the treasury.

Then the knight brought out the gold,

the silver, the rich raiment and precious jewels, and with a generous hand bestowed them upon the company. At this the queen was angry.

“Does he think,” she asked, “that I have sent for Death to take me? Never did a queen trust her wealth to such a spendthrift treasurer.”

“Trouble not yourself, lady,” said Hagen, “for in the Rhineland King Gunther has store of treasure rich enough.”

“It is no matter,” said the queen proudly; “I will not come to him penniless. For my own use I must have twenty coffers of gold, and silken stuff in plenty. And now it is our duty to fix upon one in whose charge this realm of ours must be left in our absence.”

The queen turned to Gunther, and for a few moments discussed this important matter with him. Soon it was agreed to leave as

regent in the land an uncle of the queen, in whose fidelity Brunhilda could safely trust.

The next business to be taken in hand was the preparation for the voyage across the sea. It was no light task, for the warlike queen would not be satisfied without a bodyguard of at least two thousand warriors, who were to go with her to the Rhineland. These were therefore chosen, and splendidly equipped for the journey. And when all was ready, they were embarked in vessels with sails as white as snow.

Then the queen herself came down to the river bank, attended by a company of eighty women and a hundred of the fairest maidens in her kingdom. Her kinsfolk came down to bid her farewell, and as she stepped on board the vessel which was to convey her across the sea, they took leave of her with kindliness, and wished her a pleasant voyage to her new home.

Last of all, the heroes from the Rhineland came on board the queen's ship. Then all the vessels moved like a flock of white-winged sea-birds into the broad mouth of the river, with their prows set seaward. Soon they were sweeping merrily across the ocean waves, while the watchers on the towers of Isenstein stood with their hands shading their eyes as long as the vessels could be seen. It was their last sight of Brunhilda their queen, for to the land of her forefathers she came again no more.

On the ninth day of the voyage across the ocean Hagen came to King Gunther, as he sat on the deck of his vessel, and said to him,—

“My lord king, we have not as yet sent tidings of our coming to your royal city. Your heralds ought to have arrived in Burgundy some time ago.”

“You are right,” said Gunther; “and

for the office of herald there is no one better fitted than yourself."

"Nay," said Hagen ; "let me stay here in attendance upon you and the queen, my mistress. Send Siegfried on the errand. He is stronger and better fitted for the journey than I. If he refuses, conjure him by his love for your sister, the Princess Kriemhilda."

At once Gunther sent a messenger to Siegfried, who hastened to respond to the call of the king.

"Siegfried," said the latter, "seeing that we are drawing near to my own kingdom, I ought to send a messenger to my sister and my mother. Grant me this favour, I pray. Be my herald upon this occasion, and so earn my lasting thanks."

At first Siegfried was, for some reason best known to himself, unwilling to undertake the journey. But when Gunther asked

him to do so for the sake of the Princess Kriemhilda, he gave his consent at once.

“Whatever you ask for the sake of that dear maiden,” he said, “I cannot deny.”

“Go, then,” said Gunther, “and announce our coming to my mother. Tell her of the happy issue of our perilous adventure. Tell my sister also ; and add in her ear that Brunhilda and myself will ever be her friends. Then seek out the master of the revels, and tell him to prepare for a gallant festival in honour of the arrival of my beautiful queen.”

Siegfried thereupon was landed at a point near the mouth of the Rhine, and rode forward rapidly with four-and-twenty horsemen to act as the king’s herald. In due time the party arrived at Worms, and rode down the chief street of the city. The people looked out from their doors and windows, as they had done on the day that Siegfried first entered the royal city, and

soon the frightened murmur ran among them, "'Tis Siegfried himself, but he comes without the king !" And without waiting for further news, some of the whisperers began to discuss eagerly the fate of the kingdom which had lost its ruler.

But Siegfried and his companions rode onward with the light of home-coming joy on their faces, and before long they arrived at the doorway of Gunther's royal hall. At once Giselher and Gernot came forward to greet the prince, and in faltering voices they begged for news of their brother, the king.

"Forgo your fears," said Siegfried ; " my noble comrade sends to you his loyal love and greeting. I left him in good health. Indeed, it was at his command that I rode forward to announce his coming. Now lead me to your mother and your sister, that they, too, may hear the message which I bear from King Gunther and Queen Brunhilda."

“Kriemhilda will see you gladly, I warrant me,” said Giselher, adding, with perhaps a little malice, “she has suffered greatly in her anxious fear for *her brother’s* safety.”

Then the young prince went off himself to tell his mother and sister of the coming of Siegfried ; and the ladies hastened to put on their richest robes in honour of the event.

Soon the noble hero stood once more face to face with the maiden princess whom he loved so dearly.

“Be welcome, my lord Siegfried !” she cried. “Where is my brother, the noble Gunther ? Is he lost to us through the prowess of the warrior-queen ? If so, woe is me, poor maiden, that ever I was born !”

Then, with a smile of reassurance upon his frank and handsome face, Siegfried cried,—

“Now pay to me the herald’s fee, for

there is here no need for tears. I left Gunther in lusty health. He sends to you his duty—he, and also his bride. Soon they will be here to greet you, hand to hand.”

Then the princess with her snow-white kerchief dried the tears which welled up into her lovely eyes ; and holding out her hand, she thanked the princely herald for his thrice-welcome news.

“As for the herald’s fee,” she said, with a smile, “I shall be glad to give you all that I possess ; but even that would be small payment. Let me remain your debtor for ever and for aye.”

“If in my turn I had thirty kingdoms,” replied the prince, “I would be proud to receive the smallest gift from you.”

“Well,” said the maiden, “if that be so, you shall have the herald’s fee.”

Then she sent her chamberlain to her private treasury, and he returned, bringing

in his hands four-and-twenty buckles set with precious stones.

Siegfried bowed low as he received the gift ; but seeing that the payment to him lay in the gracious giving, he handed round the trinkets to the ladies attending on the princess.



She kissed her on the lips.

Chapter XI.

THE DOUBLE WEDDING.

THE mother of Kriemhilda greeted Siegfried kindly and in a courtly manner. Then the prince said,—

“The king wishes you to make ready for the arrival of his noble guests, and to ride out from the city to the river bank, there to welcome his bride and himself.”

“We are ready to do so,” said Kriemhilda. “All shall be done in loyal kindness just as he desires.”

Siegfried bowed low in reply ; and as she marked his grace and courtliness, and the smile on his brave face, the princess felt

within her heart that no maiden had ever such a worthy lover.

The royal stewards now set their men to work to prepare a fitting place on the bank of the river for the reception of King Gunther and his bride. Messengers were sent to all the towns and castles in the land, to carry the glad news of the king's successful wooing, and to bid guests to the wedding. The royal palace was gaily decked in honour of the noble guests, and the streets of the city were soon gay with pennons and garlands of flowers.

Then along all the highways throughout the countryside were seen the kinsmen and lieges of the king riding into Worms. And one morning messengers came hot-foot to announce that the vessels containing the bridal party had been seen some miles down the river.

At once there was great stir in the city,

and hasty preparations were made for meeting the king.

“Go, my maidens,” said Kriemhilda, when the news was brought to her in her bower, “and take from my presses the richest of my festival robes. It is fitting that we should appear in our best to grace this glorious day.”

The squires of the princess made haste to prepare the gaily-caparisoned horses on which Kriemhilda and her bower-maidens were to ride down to the river bank. The bridles and saddles sparkled with many a stone of great price, and golden footstools were brought out and placed near the horses for the ladies mounting.

Soon they came forth from the doorway, the loveliest band of maidens that had ever been seen in the Burgundian land. Their flaxen tresses were bound with the brightest of ribbons, and they were clad in the richest

raiment that the wardrobe of the princess could supply.

Quickly they mounted their horses, and then, to the merry jingle of the bells upon the bridles, they rode forward, with Kriemhilda in the place of honour. Each horse was led by a knight in gay attire, and that of the princess was in charge of Siegfried himself.

Meanwhile Gunther and his party had landed at a point lower down the river; and when Kriemhilda reached the side of the stream, she saw at the farther bank the king and his guests, making a show as gay as those who had ridden forth to welcome them.

Before long the travellers were on board the vessel which was to convey them across the stream, and Kriemhilda waited with some impatience to see them land once more. At a signal given by the princess

each of her party had dismounted, and the maidens grouped themselves round their royal mistress to do honour to the king and his bride.

King Gunther was the first to step upon the landing-stage, leading by his left hand the royal maid Brunhilda. At once Kriemhilda moved forward to greet them, and taking Brunhilda's hands in her own, she kissed her on the lips.

"Right welcome are you," she said softly, "to me, to my mother, and to all those who in this land count us as friends."

The queen bent low in courteous greeting, and then in her turn kissed the maiden princess. Next came King Gunther, whom his sister greeted tenderly ; then, while the knights and ladies of both parties renewed their friendship, the two princesses stood side by side watching the gay scene. And those who saw them as they stood there

thought that they had never seen a pair so well matched for beauty and grace.

After a while the royal party led the way to the plain outside the city, on which had been erected many a rich pavilion and silken tent. Brunhilda and Kriemhilda were conducted to the central pavilion, from which they could see the whole of the open space on which the knightly contests were to be fought.

Meanwhile the combatants had donned their armour and mounted their chargers. The heralds gave the signal, and soon the dust of combat arose, and loud were the blows which rained upon helmet and breastplate as the valiant knights strove to prove their valour before the eyes of the brilliant company of ladies of high degree. Among the bravest of the warriors Siegfried was the foremost, and the bright eyes of Kriemhilda watched him closely as he bore away prize after prize in the mimic battle.

Then word was sent by Hagen to stop the games, lest the dust should soil the beautiful raiment of the princesses and their maidens. The combatants parted smilingly, and the king then led the way to the royal palace, where a supper was to be given to the chief of the guests.

Gunther himself conducted Brunhilda towards the banquet-hall ; and now it was seen that for the first time since her arrival she wore a crown upon her head, as a sign that she had come as queen to her own kingdom. But before they reached the hall of audience Siegfried met them and said,—

“You must remember, King Gunther, how you promised, on your oath, that if ever Queen Brunhilda came to this land you would give me as my wife your sister, the Princess Kriemhilda. I have spent myself in your service, and now that your own

adventure is happily concluded, I claim the fulfilment of your oath."

Then the king said, "You did well to speak of this matter, Prince Siegfried. That which I promised on my oath, I will surely perform." Then turning to a messenger, the king sent him to summon the Princess Kriemhilda to his presence. Meanwhile Brunhilda went forward with her own attendants to the banquet-hall, to await the arrival of the rest of the party.

Soon Kriemhilda came in answer to the royal summons, accompanied by a band of her maidens. But when Giselher saw the attendants, he stood forward and said,—

"Bid these damsels return to the bower of the princess, for on this occasion Kriemhilda must speak with the king alone."

This order was at once obeyed, and the princess was led to the place where the king stood, surrounded by his nobles.

“Dear sister,” said Gunther, “I have taken an oath, the fulfilment of which depends upon your kindness. I have promised you in marriage to a certain prince, who now comes to ask me to redeem my solemn pledge.”

The presence of Siegfried at such an interview was enough to prove to the princess that her brother had promised her hand to the man to whom she had already given her heart. But she had been trained to implicit obedience to Gunther, who took the place of her dead father, and her reply made no reference to her lover.

“My brother,” she said, “my will is ever thine. What you have promised shall be. I will take as a husband the prince whom you give to me.”

But even as she spoke these dutiful words she turned her eyes to the place where Siegfried stood, and as she looked at him the face of the noble prince flushed with pleasure.

There was now no doubt in her mind that the choice which had been made for her by her brother was also her own.

Siegfried now stepped forward and took the princess by the hand ; then he led her into the banquet-hall, where Brunhilda was rather impatiently waiting the arrival of Gunther. Seats of honour were placed at the high table for Siegfried and Kriemhilda, and as soon as the royal party was seated the banquet began.

But the arrival of Siegfried and Kriemhilda hand in hand seemed to disturb the mind of Brunhilda. A frown appeared upon her lovely brow, and soon, to the astonishment of King Gunther, tears began to fall down her cheeks.

“What ails you, my lady ?” asked the king tenderly. “’Tis no time for sorrow, but rather for joy. Are you not queen of my land and mistress of my many castles ?”

"I have good cause for weeping," said Brunhilda. "Of a truth, my heart is sad for your sister when I see her sitting next to a mere vassal of our own, having plainly taken him as her lord and master."

"I beseech you," replied Gunther in a low voice, "to grieve no longer. At some more fitting time I will tell you the story of what Siegfried has done for me, and of my promise to give him the hand of Kriemhilda as a reward."

"Nay," said Brunhilda, her eyes now flashing with anger, "you must tell me now. Indeed, I will be no wife of yours unless you make it clear at once why Kriemhilda should be the bride of Siegfried."

"Then hear me," said Gunther, not without a trace of anger in his voice. "The prince has as many castles as I, and owns lands even broader than mine. At his father's death he will be a king mightier

and richer than myself. For these good reasons, as well as in return for his loyal service to myself, I gladly give him the Princess Kriemhilda as his bride."

This reply seemed to satisfy Brunhilda, and the feast proceeded. Then, when it was over, the two royal couples were joined in marriage before the eyes of their retainers, and loud were the shouts of joy which rang through the vaulted hall.

Chapter XII.

THE INVITATION TO WORMS.

FOR several days the wedding feast was kept, and great was the generosity of King Gunther and Prince Siegfried to the assembled guests. Then when the feasting and merry-making were over, the prince and his bride made ready to journey to the royal city of King Siegmund.

But first there was some discussion between Gunther and Siegfried on the matter of a marriage portion for Kriemhilda. The king and his two brothers generously offered to Siegfried an equal share with his wife and themselves in the lands and castles of the kingdom. At first Siegfried refused this,

saying courteously that his wife would gladly forgo her portion, as she would soon be queen over broad lands of her own.

Hereupon Kriemhilda was a little displeased, and asked that at least she might have a fitting bodyguard of Burgundian knights to conduct her with due honour to her new home. This was granted to her, and soon she set out with her husband, accompanied by a troop of five hundred men and a band of fair maidens, twenty-two in number, who had been chosen to attend upon her.

After a journey of a few days the party arrived at the palace of Siegmund. The aged king lovingly greeted his new daughter, and high festival was held in honour of her arrival. Then calling his liegemen together in the great hall of his castle, the king announced that he meant to give up his crown to his son.

The news pleased the lords and the people, who were proud of their young and heroic prince, and the government passed at once into the hands of King Siegfried, while his wife took charge of his household, which she ruled with care and diligence, according to the precepts of her noble mother.

In time a son was born to the royal pair, and the child was named Gunther. Brunhilda also had a son, who was given the name of Siegfried. The happiness of the royal couples seemed indeed to be complete.

Now, since her marriage Brunhilda had quite given up the warlike exercise and feats of strength in which she had taken delight during her maidenhood. She now busied herself in the affairs of the palace, leaving the spear and the shield to the warriors. But she was not quite happy. Her proud and haughty spirit was not really tamed,

and, sad to say, it found vent in spite and jealousy.

She had always been distrustful of Siegfried, and now that he had become a more powerful monarch than her own husband she began to hate both him and his wife. Kriemhilda seemed to her to bear herself very haughtily, and she made up her mind to humble the proud Queen of the Netherland if she could.

“Why,” she said to herself, “does Dame Kriemhilda bear herself in such a lofty way? Is not her husband Siegfried a vassal of our own? Yet he has paid us scant service since the day he bore away Kriemhilda as his bride.”

She brooded over this thought until envy and hatred of Siegfried and his wife spoilt her happiness completely. Then one day she sought out the king, her husband, told him what troubled her, and asked him to



Queen Brunhilda was for the moment taken by surprise.

summon Siegfried and his wife to Worms. Gunther was ill pleased at the request.

“How are we to bring them here?” he asked. “They dwell too far away; and, moreover, I am not sure that they would come at my request.”

“However high and mighty a king’s vassal may be,” said Brunhilda, with half-suppressed scorn in her voice, “he must not disobey his lord’s commandment.”

Gunther smiled at the queen’s vehemence. He, at least, had no thought of homage and duty whenever he had the good fortune to meet with his friend, King Siegfried.

The queen’s face changed. A smile arose to her lips, though not to her eyes.

“My beloved lord,” she said, “I pray you, for my sake, send a courteous message to Siegfried, asking them to pay us the honour of a visit. This would please me well. The thought of your dear sister is always pleasant

to my mind. I remember well her gentle breeding, her contentment, and her kindness to me when first I came to this land of ours."

"Be sure," said King Gunther, "that *guests* more welcome could not come to our royal city. It is easy to persuade me to do what you ask. Messengers shall be sent at once to bring King Siegfried and Kriemhilda to Worms. I will choose a band of thirty trusty warriors to conduct them hither, and before they set out you must see that they are fitly clad for such an errand."

The king went at once to choose his messengers, and Queen Brunhilda busied herself in preparing rich raiment for them. Soon they were on their way, entrusted with a courteous message to King Siegfried and his wife, asking them as a favour to come as honoured guests to Gunther's royal city.

It was known that at the moment Sieg-

fried and his queen were staying in their Nibelung stronghold on the Norwegian border, and it took three weeks' hard riding to reach the place. Kriemhilda was resting on a couch in her bower when the strangers were announced, and when she heard that they were richly dressed in the Burgundian fashion, she rose quickly and ran to a window, whence she could see the men-at-arms in the courtyard below.

Siegfried at that moment came into the room, and taking his arm, she led him to the window to show him the strangers. At once the king left the apartment to greet his guests; and the leader of the band, a brave knight named Gere, was immediately led into the royal hall.

"Before I seat myself," he said, in response to Siegfried's courteous greetings, "let me deliver the message sent by my royal master and mistress. They ask you to come with

your queen to Rhineland, to a high festival to be held as soon as the winter is over."

"Nay, that can hardly be," said Siegfried.

"Say not so, my lord," said the messenger, "for the presence of you and your wife is greatly longed for in the Burgundian land."

"Let the matter rest for the moment," was the reply ; "and meanwhile let us show you and your company all good cheer and hospitality."

Preparations were now made for feasting the heralds, and while the banquet was going forward Siegfried sent messengers to summon to a council those of his liegemen who lived nearest to him. When they had come together, he asked their advice on the matter of the visit, and one of the oldest and wisest spoke.

"If you have a desire to go to this high festival, Sir King," he said, "our counsel is

that you should go, taking with you a thousand warriors."

Then without more delay preparations were made for the journey, while Gere and his company were sent forward to announce the coming of the royal guests. They carried with them from the Nibelung stronghold much more than the herald's fee. Heavily laden were their chargers as they rode on their way, so generous were the gifts of the royal pair.

Chapter XIII.

THE JOURNEY TO WORMS.

AT the time of the invitation to Worms the father of Siegfried was staying with his son in the Nibelung stronghold on the Norwegian border. And when the old man heard of the intended journey, he sought out his son and said to him,—

“Will you go to this high festival and leave me behind? If it will not shame you, I will go along with you, and take as my bodyguard a hundred swordsmen to swell your retinue.”

“Will you also ride with us, my good father?” said Siegfried, with a pleasant smile upon his manly face. “Right gladly do

we hear it. We shall leave before twelve days are past, and I shall be proud indeed to have you with me."

At the end of this period all was ready for the journey. It was agreed to leave at home behind them the young son of Siegfried. Little did Siegfried guess, when he parted with the little prince, that he would never see him again.

Soon the party was on the way, and all possible speed was made upon the journey. When they drew near to the Burgundian land, a band of heralds was sent on in advance to announce their coming to Gunther and his wife. Then a company of Gunther's men rode out from Worms to meet them, while busy preparations were made in the city to provide a fitting welcome for the royal party.

Gunther himself sought out Queen Brunhilda, and said to her, "You will remember

how my sister greeted you when you first came to this kingdom? Even in the selfsame fashion you must now welcome her."

"That I will, and gladly," said the queen, concealing the jealousy and hatred which gnawed at her heart, "for I love her dearly as my sister and yours."

"They will no doubt arrive," said the king, well pleased at the answer, "early to-morrow morning, so that you must make haste with your preparations."

Brunhilda at once called her waiting-women, and ordered them to put on their finest raiment on the following morning, and to come early to her chamber to prepare her to receive the honoured guests. And when on the next day Gunther rode with his attendants into the courtyard of the castle, Brunhilda and her women, attired in glorious apparel, were waiting on

the broad stone stairway to go with him to greet the guests.

Before they had ridden far upon their way they met with a gallant company escorting Kriemhilda, and soon King Gunther and his queen were offering to the noble lady a loving welcome on her return to her native city. While this greeting was going forward Siegfried rode up, and was also warmly welcomed by King Gunther. Then the latter turned to Siegmund, who rode by the side of his son, and said,—

“You also are welcome, King Siegmund, as, indeed, is every kinsman of our dear brother and friend.”

“God prosper you,” said the old man gravely and courteously. “Since my son’s friendship for you and yours began I have wished to see you face to face, and now I am indeed content.”

The royal party now lingered no longer,

but rode towards the town, and soon the guests were fittingly lodged within the palace. Then, after resting for a while, they came into the banquet-hall, and a supper was provided for some two thousand noble guests. The two kings and their consorts graced the high table, and the feasting and merriment lasted far into the night.

Before the next day had fully dawned several of the younger knights were astir, eager to exercise their horses and to prepare for the great tournament, in which the prizes were to be many and of very great value. And as soon as the morning meal was over in the royal hall, preparations were made to begin the mimic battle. Loud and shrill resounded the blasts of the trumpets, and the noise of the drums and pipes might have been heard at a great distance from the royal city.

The knights mounted their chargers, and

rode, with many a jest and peal of manly laughter, to the great space outside the city which had been prepared for the tournament. Then the two queens, each with a long train of attendants richly clad, came to their gay pavilion, and took their places to watch the knightly contests and encourage the combatants by their presence.

Soon the games were in full swing. Many a knight of high renown took part in them, and deeds of great skill and prowess were done again and again. Gunther himself took part with Siegfried in the various contests, and in courtesy the kings at times allowed themselves to be beaten by the younger knights.

Then from the minster tower the bells called the company to evensong. The attendants brought gaily-caparisoned palfreys for the royal ladies and their women, and when they had mounted, the knights came

forward one by one to lead the animals to the great door of the cathedral.

Alighting at the foot of the steps, the ladies stood for a while on the green sward laughing and talking among themselves. Then, on the arrival of the kings, a procession was formed, and wended its way to the sound of sweetest music up the dim aisle of the glorious minster.

For eleven days the festival continued, and no cloud arose to spoil the pleasure of the royal party and their noble guests.

Chapter XIV.

THE QUARREL OF THE QUEENS.

TOWARDS the close of the eleventh day of the festival the two queens were seated side by side in the great pavilion. During the whole of the merrymaking they had been, to all appearance, the best of friends. But now, for some strange reason, Kriemhilda began a quarrel which was destined to have a most bitter ending.

Whether her quick eyes had noted the smothered hatred and envy of Brunhilda during the festival, we cannot tell ; but as they sat watching the games in the lists, in which Siegfried and Gunther were taking their part, Kriemhilda suddenly said,—

“My noble husband is rightly ruler of this kingdom.”

Queen Brunhilda was for a moment taken by surprise.

“That could never be,” she said hotly, after a pause, “unless, indeed, there were none living of the royal line but yourself. In that case, the rule of this kingdom would pass into the hands of Siegfried. But so long as Gunther lives, he alone is ruler of the land.”

Kriemhilda raised her eyes and looked towards her husband.

“Mark him where he stands,” she said proudly ; “see how he outshines all the rest as does the moon the stars. I have good cause for all my pride in him.”

“Comely, gallant, and handsome your lord is, indeed,” returned Brunhilda ; “but in this land and elsewhere Gunther stands foremost.”

“Not so,” said Kriemhilda. “So many great deeds has Siegfried done that at least you will allow him to be the equal of your husband.”

“Do not take it ill if I tell you,” replied Brunhilda, “that when I first saw Gunther and Siegfried together, your husband told me with his own lips that he was your brother’s vassal. And so it was understood of all in my castle of Isenstein far across the sea.”

“How could it be,” asked Kriemhilda, “that my noble brother should promise me in marriage to a mere retainer? I beg of you, Brunhilda, in all true friendliness, to let this dispute come to an end.”

“I will not do so,” said Brunhilda, with anger in her voice. “Why should I yield up my claim to Siegfried’s service, and to the homage he owes to my good lord?”

“You must once for all,” answered Kriemhilda, “give up all thoughts of service to

be rendered to you by my husband. He is indeed a worthier prince than my brother, noble though Gunther may be."

"You rate yourself too highly," said Brunhilda, now in a fury of passion. "I will test for you before long whether you and your husband have won the respect and honour which all men accord to me."

"This must at once be proved," retorted Kriemhilda, accepting the angry challenge. "This very day I mean to show you that I am no vassal of yours, and that in the eyes of all the lords and ladies of Burgundy."

"Do you indeed deny that you and your husband are vassals of ours?" asked the angry queen. "From this moment I bid you to keep your attendants apart from mine when I go in state to the minster."

Kriemhilda without a word at once left the pavilion, and returned with her women to her apartment.



“Without delay, I will undertake this business.”

“Now robe yourselves, my maidens,” she said, “put on your richest attire, and we shall see whether this angry queen will dare to flout us. She shall repent at leisure what she has said to me.”

There was little need to urge the girls to seek out their finest robes. But when Kriemhilda led the lovely band to the minster doorway, she found Brunhilda already awaiting her, surrounded by a company of high-born dames and maidens dressed also in their best.

The knights and ladies now plainly saw that all was not well between the two queens, who throughout the festival had been like loving sisters.

As Kriemhilda moved forward to the steps leading to the minster doorway, Brunhilda barred her path.

“Before a queen in her own city,” she cried, “no vassal shall ever take right of way !”

Then Kriemhilda said in a steady voice,—

“ Could you have kept silence, it had been well for you. But now let all around us know for a surety that it was not Gunther my brother who overcame you in your war-like game, but my good lord Siegfried and no other. By means of his manly strength and prowess, he broke your pride and won you for King Gunther. Why did you let one whom you claim as your vassal overcome you in such a way ? ”

Brunhilda hung her head ; then covering her face with her jewelled hands, she wept bitter tears of shame and anger. Kriemhilda turned, and mounting the broad stone stairway, led her band of maidens within the minster, as a sign to all that she did not acknowledge in the least the claim of Brunhilda to her service and respect.

Meanwhile, the humbled queen stood

without at the foot of the steps. But after a while hatred succeeded to anger. Her spirits rose, and now in her heart revenge was lord and master.

“I will await her return,” she said, with bitter anger in her tone, “the scolding, sharp-tongued vixen ! And if Siegfried has been boasting his prowess, it is like to cost him his life.”

Chapter XV.

THE BEGINNING OF STRIFE.

WHEN evensong was over Queen Kriemhilda swept proudly down the aisle of the minster, and stood for a moment at the top of the stairway glancing to right and left. Then her eyes fell upon Queen Brunhilda and her party, and stepping down, she moved forward as if she meant to pass her by in scorn.

“Stay, haughty princess,” called Brunhilda. “You told me a tale just now, the truth of which you must prove.”

Kriemhilda paused for a moment ; then she came close to the angry queen and said a few words in her ear.

Brunhilda's eyes flashed fire as she listened to her. Then, turning to a squire, she said, "Go now and bring to me King Gunther himself. He shall hear from my own lips how his sister slanders both him and me."

The king came at once with a bodyguard of warriors, and when he saw the tear-stained face of his wife, he said in a kindly tone, "Now tell me, dearest lady, what troubles you."

"Unhappy that I am," said the queen, raising her face. "Kriemhilda, your sister and mine, tells a tale which robs both you and me of honour. She says, and stoutly upholds it, that it was Siegfried and not yourself who conquered me in the trial of strength."

Gunther frowned in anger.

"We will send for Siegfried," he said. "If he has been playing the braggart, he shall declare the truth before us all—or

else he shall deny this slander," the king added, somewhat lamely.

A messenger was now sent for Siegfried, and before long he stood before them.

"Why are these ladies weeping?" he asked, when he saw the troubled faces of his wife and Brunhilda; "and why am I sent for by my brother, the king?"

Gunther stood for a few moments irresolute. Then he said to Siegfried, "Take now, my friend and brother, a solemn oath before these queens that it was not you but I myself who won the love of Queen Brunhilda by conquering her in the trial of strength."

Siegfried put out his hand slowly and doubtfully to take the oath required, but before he could speak the solemn words Gunther raised his hand.

"Stay, brother," he said; "I acquit you of such boasting, and require no oath of you."

“It grieves me, noble king,” said Siegfried more brightly, “that these ladies should mar the pleasure of our festival by such an unseemly brawl. Do you forbid your wife, on pain of chastisement, to continue the quarrel, and I will do the same. So should a prince tame his women-folk if he would enjoy peace of mind and a quiet house.”

Then the parties separated. But the fire of hatred had been kindled in the heart of Brunhilda, and henceforth she had little rest by day or night. A few days later the knight Hagen came on a message to the room in which sat the unhappy queen, weeping as if her heart would break. In courteous tones he begged her to tell him what ailed her ; and she gladly told him all the tale, concluding by saying that Siegfried, whom she looked upon as the real offender, must be punished in some way or she would never live happily again.

At that moment King Gunther's brother Gernot and a knight named Ortwein also entered the apartment ; and having learned the cause of the queen's trouble, they joined at once with Hagen in forming a plot to take the life of Siegfried as soon as occasion should offer.

As they spoke in whispers together the young prince Giselher also came into the room, and was soon made acquainted with the cause of the queen's anger and sorrow. When he had heard the story, he said in his frank manner,—

“ Alas ! you gallant warriors, why do you plot against the life of so noble a prince and so true-hearted a brother ? I do not believe that Siegfried deserves such hatred. Some trifles have angered the queen, my sister, and she makes more of them than they deserve.”

“ Are we to harbour traitors ? ” cried Hagen, whose love for Siegfried had never

been great. "That would be small honour to such knights as we. His life must pay the forfeit, or I myself will die."

"He has done no harm to us," said Giselher stoutly, "so let his life alone. It is no excuse for treachery that a man shall be hated. He has been faithful to me and mine, and I will take no step to harm him."

Then Hagen left the room and went to find King Gunther, to whom he told his plan.

"If King Siegfried were dead," he said craftily, "the broad lands over which he rules would become subject to you."

"Let the matter rest," said Gunther in his irresolute manner. "The trumpets call us to the games." Then he rose to make his way to the lists.

But Hagen was not to be shaken off. Walking by the side of his royal master, he continued his vile persuasions.

“Lay aside this murderous hate and scorn,” said King Gunther after a while. “A nobler prince and knight never lived. See how he carries himself in the tournament; how he loves the joy of movement and the exercise of manly strength. If only he had an inkling of your plans, how boldly he would acquit himself!”

“He will never know,” said Hagen, with ill-concealed scorn, “unless, indeed, you tell him yourself. I tell you that I can bring about his death in secret, and make him pay dearly for his treachery to Brunhilda.”

“And how may that be done?” asked Gunther, who was not strong-minded enough to forbid once and for all any mention of the matter.

“That I can readily tell you,” was the reply. “We will command two of our men to disguise themselves as envoys from a foreign land, and come to offer us a mock

challenge to war. Then before your guests you must declare that you intend to answer the challenge, and summon your liegemen to your banner. Siegfried will, without doubt, offer you his service. Meanwhile, I will find out from his wife's own lips how his strength may be overcome by craft, and from this expedition he will never return."

It was a fateful moment for King Gunther, and in his weakness he chose the wrong. No longer did he resist the crafty plots of Hagen, but began eagerly to discuss how best the foul deed might be done.

"Siegfried," he said to himself, "was really to blame. He must at least have told his wife something of the way in which Brunhilda was won. Let his treachery recoil upon himself."

Chapter XVI.

HOW SIEGFRIED WAS BETRAYED.

ON the morning of the fourth day after the forming of the plot, a band of two-and-thirty horsemen came riding into Worms, and the leader asked to be directed to the royal hall. The way was pointed out to him by a man-at-arms, who at once sent a youth at topmost speed to carry to King Gunther news of the arrival of the strangers.

The king came out to meet them, and then turning, led their chief into the hall of audience, where he courteously begged him to be seated. But the knight as courteously refused, and standing before the king's throne delivered his message. He was the

loyal servant, he said, of Ludiger, a neighbouring king, who some time ago had been vanquished and captured by Siegfried when he went out to fight in the name of King Gunther.

This king had now allied himself with another monarch named Ludegast, and sent to Gunther by the mouth of his heralds defiance and a challenge of war.

"The kings are now marching hither with their armies," said the messenger boldly, "and mean to trample your towns to dust."

Then King Gunther pretended to be very angry at this insolent message ; but restraining himself, he told the herald to withdraw while he conferred with his advisers. The knight obeyed him ; and when he was gone, the king, Hagen, and the other conspirators sat whispering together until it happened that Siegfried himself entered the hall.

"Why do you look so mournful?" he

asked, with his ready smile. "If any man has done a wrong to the king, I will avenge him, and that without delay."

"I have good cause to be sad," said the false-hearted Gunther, "for Ludiger and Ludegast have challenged me to war. Indeed, they are even now on their way towards this city, and we shall soon see them riding through the land and laying waste as they go."

But Siegfried laughed cheerily.

"Without delay," he cried, "I will undertake this business ; and as I broke the power of these kings in days now long gone by, so will I deal with them again. Their own strongholds shall be ruined, and their lands shall be laid waste before I have ended with them.

"You may stay quietly at home, King Gunther," he went on, "with all your warriors, and let me ride out to battle at

the head of the men who came with me to your royal festival. This offer I make in all willingness, and before long your foes shall be humbled, I promise you."

"That is pleasant to hear," said the king, with a false smile, as if he were really well pleased to have Siegfried's aid in the business.

"'Tis nothing," replied Siegfried lightly. "You may thank me, if it pleases you, when the work is done."

Then they set to work to plan the expedition ; and when this was done, Siegfried went from the hall to summon his men and prepare them for the task in hand. As he left the king's palace he met his father Siegmund, and in a few moments told him all about the warlike challenge and his offer of help to Gunther.

"My father," he added earnestly, "stay behind in the city, I pray you. We shall not require much time for this business.

If God speed us, as I pray He may, we shall return to Worms in a few weeks. Meanwhile, do you spend the time as happily as you may."

To this the old man consented, though somewhat unwillingly ; for aged as he was, his heart was stout and warlike, and he secretly longed to end his days in battle at the head of his men.

Soon the brave band of warriors was ready, and prepared to follow their heroic lord wherever he might choose to lead them. Then the false-hearted Hagen sought out Kriemhilda, and bowing low before her, begged her permission to make use of King Siegfried and his brave warriors on the king's errand.

The queen's face paled as she heard his words. But she proudly raised herself erect.

"Thrice happy am I," said the noble

lady, "that I have for my lord a prince who can bring such ready help to my dear brother and to his kingdom. Therefore no word of grief from me shall sadden the heart of Siegfried.

"But," she went on, as a look of anxiety came into her sweet face, "I pray you, my good friend Hagen, to remember this : I have always been your friend, and never by word or deed have I done you ill. In return for my goodwill I crave your kindness and loyal service on behalf of my lord. Moreover, if I have angered Brunhilda, I pray you do not wreak vengeance upon Siegfried, for with all my heart I repent my words of bitterness. Punish me rather than allow any harm to come to him whom I love better than my life."

"You shall be forgiven," said Hagen craftily, bowing to hide his confusion, for Kriemhilda's steadfast gaze was almost more

than he could bear—"you shall be forgiven in days to come. And now, dear lady, tell me frankly how I can serve you through your husband, for my faithful service is yours both now and always."

Chapter XVII.

THE LINDEN LEAF.

KRIEMHILDA looked steadily at the knight before her, and only her anxiety for her well-loved husband prevented her from detecting his treachery.

“As for my lord,” she said slowly, “I should have no fear for his safety if he were not so reckless, so careless of his life in the face of danger.”

“Lady,” said Hagen earnestly, “tell me how I can protect him. I go with this expedition against the kings, and I shall be always by his side. Tell me how I can serve him, and so serve you also.”

“You are my kinsman, Hagen,” said the

lady, "and it would be ill if I could not trust to your care the man whom I love more dearly than all the world beside. Come, sit near me, while I tell you a tale of long ago."

She motioned the knight to a seat beneath a window, where his face would be in the shadow ; and Hagen, feeling that a crucial moment was come in the working out of his base plot, was glad that he was no longer to stand in the full light of the clear, true eyes of Kriemhilda.

"Long years ago," began the queen as soon as both were seated, "before my lord came to this land of ours, he fought a fearful dragon which had its den in the depths of a dark forest. Stern was the fight, but Siegfried's courage did not fail him, and ere long the gruesome monster lay dead at the door of its cave.

"Then Siegfried bathed in the warm blood which flowed from the monster—a fearful

bath, truly, but one which rendered him proof against the thrust of lance or the stroke of sword. Thereafter he was secure in the fight, for none could wound him."

The queen paused for a moment as though she had more to tell, as indeed she had ; and she looked doubtfully at Hagen, wondering in her heart whether she ought to trust him with the weighty secret. Then the thought of the dangers which her beloved lord was soon to encounter decided her. She might surely, she thought, place her trust in the man who had always so faithfully served her royal house. Meanwhile Hagen did not speak a word.

"Yet in spite of that bath of blood," she went on in a low voice, "I am none the less anxious whenever my lord goes forth to take his share in the battle, for I know not which of the javelins flying all around him may not bring him to his death.

“I will tell you, my friend, as a favour, the secret which troubles me; but the matter must be between you and me. Moreover, it is to preserve the safety of my lord that I make it known to you.

“There is one spot where my dear husband may be wounded. Come closer, and let me whisper my story in your ear.”

Hagen bent forward courteously so as to catch the queen’s low whisper.

“When the hot blood came welling from the monster’s death-wound,” she said, “and Siegfried took his dreadful bath, there fell between his shoulders a large-sized linden leaf and rested there. On that spot alone he can be wounded—and that is the secret of my anxious care.”

Then the knight spoke. In the excitement of the moment he found it no easy matter to preserve a level tone.

“My dearest lady,” he said, as if his

anxiety were on her account, "I can now see well how the prince must be protected. Will you sew upon his garment a little token for me, that I may know the spot which it will be my duty and pleasure to shield—ay, even at the risk of my own life?"

"That will I, and readily," said the queen. "I will embroider upon his garment a small cross of fine silk, so that you may know where to guard him when he goes into the fight."

"It will be my pleasure and my duty, my dear lady," repeated the knight as he rose and courteously took his leave.

On the next morning Siegfried rode out at the head of his company, blithe at heart and ready for battle. As he sat waiting to bid farewell to Gunther, Hagen rode up unseen behind him, and his quick eye noted the cross of silk on the gay doublet of the

king. Then suddenly he wheeled his horse so that Siegfried saw him.

The king greeted him with some surprise.

"I wait, my good friend Hagen," he said, "for King Gunther himself, to whom I wish to say farewell."

"I have news," returned the knight, "which will not be welcome to such a brave heart as yours. The rebellious kings have this morning sent envoys to my lord and master offering him submission, craving his forgiveness, and promising true service from this day forward."

The bright face of Siegfried was clouded, and he returned at once to the royal hall, where he dismounted and went to find King Gunther.

"It is not well," he said, "to let this insult pass."

"Now may God reward you for your goodwill, my noble friend," said Gunther.

“and send me in all my time of need such helpers as you have proved to be. I shall always be your debtor until death shall part us. But for the moment let us give up all our thoughts of war and revenge. I am bound on a hunting expedition in the great forest outside the city. Come now with me and share the goodly sport.”

The face of Siegfried brightened when he heard these words.

“If that is your intention,” he said, “I will gladly ride with you. Lend me a huntsman and hounds, and I shall be your debtor.”

“Do you require one huntsman only?” said the king in seeming generosity. “You shall have four men, if you please, and four of the best, to whom are well known the coverts where the bear and the boar may be roused.”

“Thanks, noble Gunther,” said the prince.

Then he turned to seek out his wife, and tell her of the change in his plans. Kriemhilda was pleased at his return, but somehow her heart misgave her when she heard of the projected hunt.

Chapter XVIII.

THE HUNT.

THE hunting expedition had been planned with care by Brunhilda and Hagen ; and Kriemhilda had more cause than she knew for the sorrow with which she parted from her husband when he rode out gaily to join the party.

Siegfried kissed his wife upon the lips.

“God keep you safe,” he said, “and may your time be merrily spent until I come again.”

The queen was about to whisper in his ear a word of warning, but the fear of Siegfried’s anger kept her silent. Yet she could not let him go without making some

effort to come between him and the danger which her heart told her was threatening him.

“Ah, my lord,” she said, “to please me, let your hunting alone. Last night I had an evil dream. I saw two wild boars which chased you over the moorland, and beneath your feet the flowers sprang red as blood. I have a misgiving that some plot has been formed against us. Go not on this expedition, my dearest lord, I pray you.”

“My love,” returned Siegfried, “in a few days I will be with you again, safe and sound. Not one of these with whom I ride bears me any ill-will. Of that I can assure you.”

“Nay, nay, my dear lord Siegfried,” cried the queen ; “my dream fills me to the heart with fear. If you leave me at this time, I *know* that I shall never see you more.”

Siegfried laughed at her fears, and taking

her in his arms, kissed her over and over again. Then he tore himself away, and left her weeping.

Soon the merry hunting-party was on its way, and before noon they came to the skirts of a deep and dark forest, where they set up an encampment. Here a party of royal servants were to stay and prepare food, whilst their masters rode into the depths of the forest to rouse the wild bear and the boar from their dens.

“Suppose we part,” said Hagen, when they had ridden forward for a space ; “then we shall see at the end of the day which of us has proved the best sportsman. Let us also divide the beaters and the hounds evenly amongst us.”

This was agreed to, but Siegfried refused his share of the hounds.

“I will take only a single setter,” he said. “I have chosen one with such a keen scent

that he will follow the game wherever it may lead. Here's to a merry hunting."

Then the riders separated as they had agreed.

Siegfried had merry sport that day. Whatever the setter marked him, he followed keenly and killed with his own hand. The first that he slew was a wild ox, fierce and savage, which rushed at him, and tried to gore the sides of his horse; but with a strong and dexterous blow he felled it to the earth.

Then his hound roused a fierce lion from its den. The angry beast bounded forward, but Siegfried sent after it a keen arrow from his mighty bow, and after making three forward bounds the king of beasts fell dead. An elk, a buffalo, four sturdy bisons, a savage stag, and a great number of harts and hinds fell to his hand. Then a great wild boar charged down the forest path

upon the hero ; but unsheathing his sword with a flash, he laid the monster dead at his charger's feet.

“ Lord Siegfried,” said his huntsman, with a grim smile upon his weather-beaten face, “ leave now for the other noble hunters a few wild beasts to slay. Before long you will empty the forest of all the game within its bounds.”

Siegfried laughed merrily as he turned his horse towards the encampment on the border of the forest. After a short ride he found himself once more within sight of the open lands, and soon saw the hunters wearily making their way to the camp, followed by their attendants carrying the spoils of the chase. And as he watched them, Siegfried felt quite sure that none of his companions had partaken of such glorious sport as he.

The clear note of a hunting-horn now

summoned the princes and knights to a meal. Siegfried and the others who were rapidly approaching the camp answered the call with bugle notes. But just as he left the shadow of the forest Siegfried espied on his right hand the rough hide of a bear.

Turning to those who followed him he cried, "Now, our comrades shall share in a little merry sport. Loose the setter, for yonder I spy a bear. I will see that he goes with us right to the camp. He cannot escape us now."

At once they loosed the hound, and the bear seeing it, set off at a run towards a deep hollow in the ground, through which it quickly scrambled. Siegfried rode after it, but his horse could not pass through the hollow, which was filled with tangled brushwood. The king therefore leapt to the ground, and started on foot in chase of the animal. He came up softly behind it, and



Death of Siegfried.

taking it unawares, clasped it round the body so as to imprison its forelegs.

With a sudden rush he brought it to the side of his horse and bound it to the saddle. Then he quickly mounted once again, and set off for the hunting-camp.

As he rode onward to the place where his enemies were eagerly awaiting him, Gunther raised his eyes and watched him; nor could the false king help thinking how noble the hero looked, how much unlike the mean men with whom he had leagued himself. Many times after that day Gunther saw as in a dream the picture of the hunter returning from the chase, free, happy-hearted, and rejoicing in his strength.

Chapter XIX.

THE CHALLENGE.

AS soon as he alighted, Siegfried, in a merry mood, loosed the binding thong from the paws and muzzle of the bear, and placed the animal on its feet. At once it made for the tent, and with the yelping dogs close upon its heels, ran into the rear apartment, where the royal cooks were preparing their master's meal.

The terrified servants ran this way and that, dropping their pots, pans, ladles, and plates as they made good their escape. Soon the bear was seated in the middle of the deserted kitchen, growling and showing its gleaming teeth. In came the dogs, and

formed a ring round the animal ; but after laying two of them upon the ground with blows from its ponderous forepaw, the bear made off towards the woods.

The hunters snatched up their spears and gave chase. But Siegfried was fleetest of foot, and having overtaken the bear, killed it with a single stroke of his sword. Then the servants came forward and dragged the carcass near to the camp fire, so that all might see it and wonder at its size.

Siegfried was now the hero of all the party except those who were in the plot. Yet for the moment even they pretended to praise him. Soon all were seated at the feast, and enjoying to the full the rich food which the king's servants had provided.

But for some strange reason no wine was set before the feasters. This was unusual, for Gunther was well known as a host of a liberal hand.

"They send us food in plenty from the kitchen," said Siegfried, "but where are the king's cup-bearers? Truly the delay is strange."

"It is the fault of Hagen," said King Gunther, "and not of my servants. However, we will make up for the omission later in the day."

"I reckoned," said Hagen, "that to-day's hunting would be fixed for a place some miles beyond our present camp, and therefore sent the wine flasks on to await our coming. I fear we must go thirsty to-day, but what of that? Next time I promise to provide wine in right royal fashion."

Siegfried was angry at the mistake, which was, in truth, no mistake at all, but part of Hagen's wicked plot, as we shall shortly see.

"Small thanks are due to you, my lord," he said. "Why, for our company, and after our exertions, we require at least seven casks

of mead and unmixed wine. And if it was impossible to provide the liquor here, then the camp ought to have been fixed in some other spot."

Hagen turned from the angry king to the company.

"My lords and gallant knights," he said, "not far from here there is a spring of clear water, and I fear that on this occasion at least we must there quench our thirst."

The company heard the remark with much displeasure, and not one ventured to excuse the error made by the king's chamberlain.

Siegfried sat inwardly fuming, for he was consumed with thirst; and as soon as the king gave the signal to rise from the feast, he took his way along the hillside towards the spring, followed by the others.

Meanwhile the royal servants began to load the draught-horses with spoils of the

chase. As he watched them at their work Hagen heard them praise again and again the skill and courage of King Siegfried. This still further roused his anger against the king who had dared to rebuke him before all the company, and when he again joined the party on the way to the spring he felt ready for any deed, however foul.

But he kept a cheerful countenance, and joined freely in the talk as they walked onward.

“I have often heard men boast,” he said, “that there is no one living who is so fleet of foot as King Siegfried. Now let the noble king show us his paces, that we may judge of the truth for ourselves.”

Siegfried smiled in answer.

“Now is the time for trying, my lord Hagen,” he said. “Let us match ourselves in a race from here up to the spring, and the rest of our friends shall be judges.”

“That will I do, and readily,” answered Hagen.

“I have something more to say,” said Siegfried. “I will not remove any of my clothing. Moreover, I will carry my spear, my buckler, and all my hunting gear.”

Hagen, however, took off his upper clothing, and as he stood ready for the signal, King Gunther cried, “Stay ! I will join in the contest also.” Then he, too, took off his leathern doublet, and stood side by side with Hagen and Siegfried ; and at a signal from one of the company the three started off at great speed towards the spring in the side of the hill.

Chapter XX.

THE FATAL BLOW.

SWIFTLY they sped along the green sward. In a few moments Siegfried and Hagen had left King Gunther behind. Then, in spite of his heavy clothes and arms, Siegfried drew ahead and came in foremost. When he reached the rippling spring he loosened his sword and let his quiver fall. Then he rested his spear against a linden tree which stood close by the water, and laid his shield upon the grass. But though his thirst was great, the courteous prince waited until Gunther should come up and drink before him.

The water of the spring was clear and

bright and cool, and with a sigh of relief Gunther sank down and drank. Then, having quenched his thirst, he left the stream and strolled away.

It was now the turn of Siegfried to stoop and drink. As he did so, Hagen quickly removed the king's bow and sword to a place beyond his reach, and grasped his spear. Then noting carefully the cross of silk on the king's tunic, he stabbed the hero as he drank; and leaving the spear in Siegfried's body, he took to flight.

Mad with rage and anguish, Siegfried sprang to his feet and looked for his bow and sword, but he could not find them. Only his shield lay near, and taking it up, he ran after Hagen with all his speed. Soon he overtook him, and with a heavy blow stretched him at full length upon the earth. If his sword had been near, the traitor knight would never have spoken again.

But by this time Siegfried's strength was ebbing fast. His cheeks grew pale, and he reeled unsteadily, then fell prone upon the grass.

"Ye perjured, lying cowards !" he cried ; "what avails my true and loyal service when it is performed for such foul traitors ? Truly your kith and kin shall bitterly rue this day."

By this time the rest of the party had come forward, and when they saw Siegfried lying on the grass their sorrow was great indeed. And now that the deed had been done, Gunther's heart smote him, and the tears began to roll down his cheeks.

Siegfried saw his sorrow, but it did not move him except to anger.

"Your grief is of little avail," he said, "for the evil has been done, and that by your own treachery."

Hagen now came forward also, having somewhat recovered from the blow which

Siegfried had given him. He at least made no pretence at sorrow.

“Why do you weep?” he said to Gunther. “Now, indeed, all our vexation is at an end. Henceforward there will be none to withstand us whatever we may wish to do. For myself, I am glad that I have been able with my own hand to free your kingdom from its foe.”

“It is easy now to boast,” said Siegfried sadly; “but had you not used treachery, I should not be lying here. But enough of that. My present care and sorrow is for Kriemhilda alone.”

He paused for a moment, and then turned his dying eyes to Gunther.

“If you, O most noble king,” he said, “are willing to keep your faith with me, I would consign to your care and protection this well-loved wife of mine. Stand by her with a true heart. Shield her from

all harm." Then with a sigh the hero died.

They laid his body upon a shield of gold, and then seating themselves in a ring, they consulted together how they might conceal from every one the fact that it was Hagen who had caused the hero's death. And one of the company said,—

"In this manner the story must be told. We must say that as Queen Kriemhilda's husband rode alone in the hunt, some robbers set upon him and slew him in the wood."

So it was agreed, though Hagen cared little whether the truth was told or not.

"I will take the body home myself," he said, "and whether the queen guesses the truth or not is a matter of no moment to me. The heart of Queen Brunhilda has been sorely troubled of late by this queen from the Nibelung land, and I care not

how many tears the widow of this proud prince may shed."

* * * * *

When the sad news of her husband's death was carried to Kriemhilda, her grief was as boundless as her love had been. It was useless for any of the plotters to go to her with a lying tale.

"See," she said to those about her when she came to gaze upon the dead form of her beloved lord, "no dint of sword-stroke can be seen upon his shield. He came to his death by murder, and while Brunhilda gave the counsel, Hagen did the deed."

But in a strange land and surrounded by foes, what could the poor queen do? The news was brought to the Nibelung warriors and to the aged Siegmund, and they came to her side at once, fully armed, ready and eager to avenge the death of the hero. But the queen warned them that they would

soon be overpowered by the greater numbers of the Burgundians.

"Noble Siegmund," she said to the aged king, "it would be well to restrain your hand. They have at the least thirty warriors to each one of ours. The day will come when they will repent this foul deed which has robbed me of my noble lord, but it is yet far distant. Let us be patient."

Preparations were then made for the burial of the prince, and a funeral service was held in the minster, to which came both Gunther and Hagen. And there, in full view of the assembled company, Kriemhilda charged her brother and the knight with bringing about the death of Siegfried.

"You are wrong, sister," said Gunther lamely. "The deed was done by vagabonds in the forest, and not by Hagen."

"These vagabonds are too well known to me," returned the queen somewhat grimly.

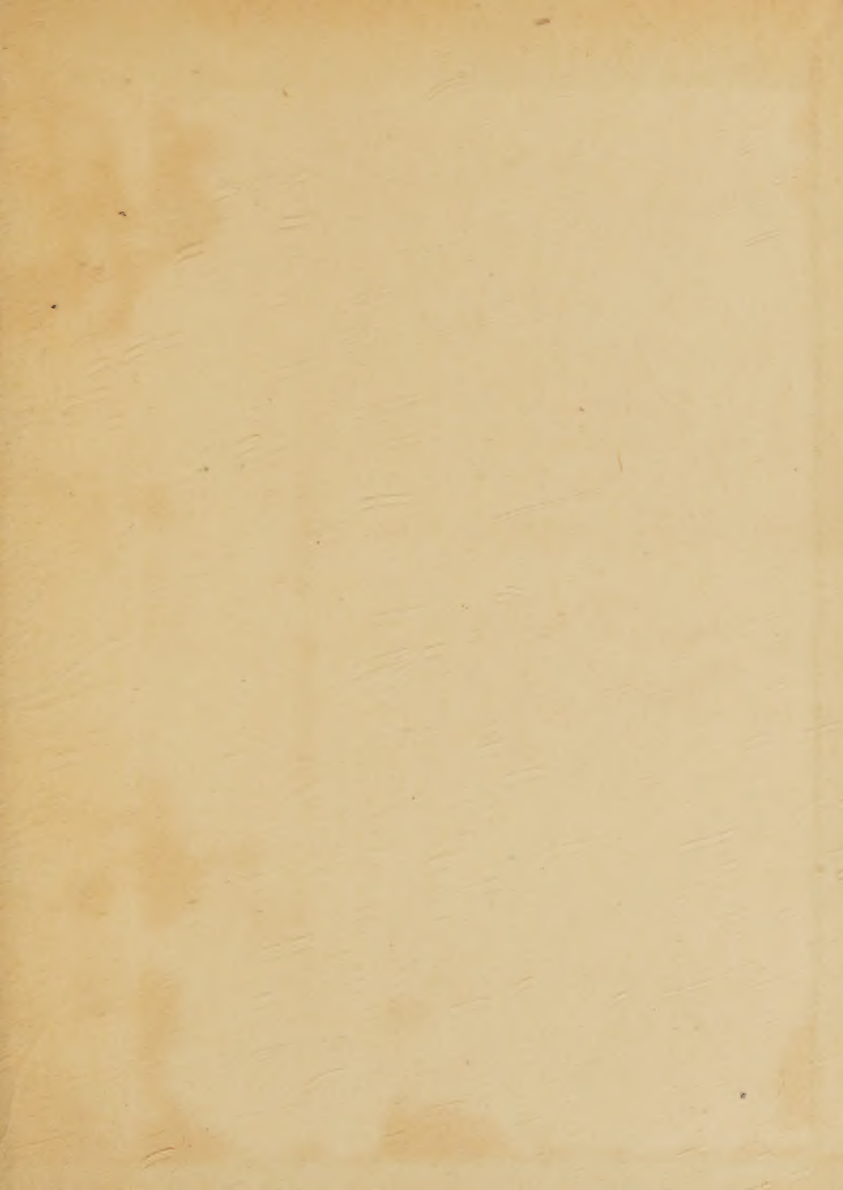
Hagen had no wish to defend himself. He cared not whom Kriemhilda blamed for the death of Siegfried, so long as Queen Brunhilda was now free from her trouble, and had avenged herself through him upon her enemy.

When the body had been laid to rest in the great minster of the city, Siegmund came to Kriemhilda and begged her to return with him to his own land; but the queen refused. She would stay in the city, she said, if only her little son could be sent to her, where she could be always near to the tomb of her loved one. So the old man went away to his home, leaving Kriemhilda behind among those who, though they were her natural protectors, had treated her so cruelly.

One thing alone sustained the spirit of the queen—the desire to find out the truth concerning the death of Siegfried, and to

punish his murderer. How this was done, and how Hagen, before meeting the death of a hero, fully atoned for his sin, is matter for another tale.

THE END.



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